

HEALTH POLICY BRIEF

RHODE ISLAND DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

A Deepening Understanding of Public Health's Work and Mission

April 2000
Issue 00-1

*Safe and Healthy Lives
in Safe and Healthy Communities*

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A Deepening Understanding...

New bases for priority-setting?

Annually, the first week of April is designated "Public Health Week," in acknowledgement of the work and mission of public health. There are new indications that with each successive year, the public is coming to a more informed understanding of how public health influences their lives.

Three recent surveys suggest a public perception that investments in public health are not just humane but also cost-effective. They show that people want to invest in prevention programs even if at the expense of other priorities such as crime fighting, tax reduction, and missile defense.

Harris polls shows people see public health work "extremely important," and favor prevention over treatment.

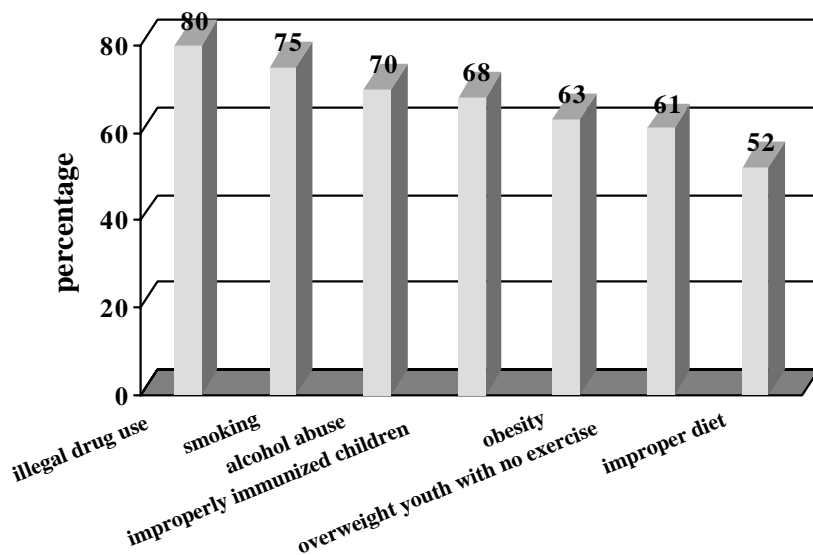
A Harris poll of 1,009 adult Americans conducted in September 1999 asked respondents how important they considered traditional tasks of public health to be. Highlights:

- Large majorities believe that most public health activities -- health promotion and disease prevention, immunization, reducing environmental risks, research into the causes and prevention of disease -- are "extremely important," whether or not they are thought of as "public health."
- By a two-to-one majority, Americans support making funding for disease prevention and health promotion a higher priority than funding for disease treatment.
- Respondents classified the following spending priorities as "very important":
 - 91% - Preventing the spread of infectious diseases (tuberculosis, measles, flu and AIDS);
 - 88% - Conducting medical research into the causes and prevention of diseases;
 - 87% - Inoculating the public against disease;
 - 86% - Guarding against exposure to unsafe water, air or waste;
 - 68% - Encouraging healthy lifestyles, diet and non-smoking.
- Those with more political influence -- the affluent and the better educated -- are even more supportive of public health than the general population.

The poll found that many respondents believed that public health "is under-funded because it is less glamorous than miracle drugs and high-tech surgery" used for treatment.

A second Harris poll, of 1,011 adult Americans, in September 1999 showed that a majority of Americans believe that the nation's major health problems are caused by unhealthy behaviors and lifestyles, including smoking, alcohol abuse, illegal use of drugs, and obesity.

of Public Health's Work and Mission



Percentage of Americans who believe that the nation's major health problems are caused by specific unhealthy behaviors and lifestyles

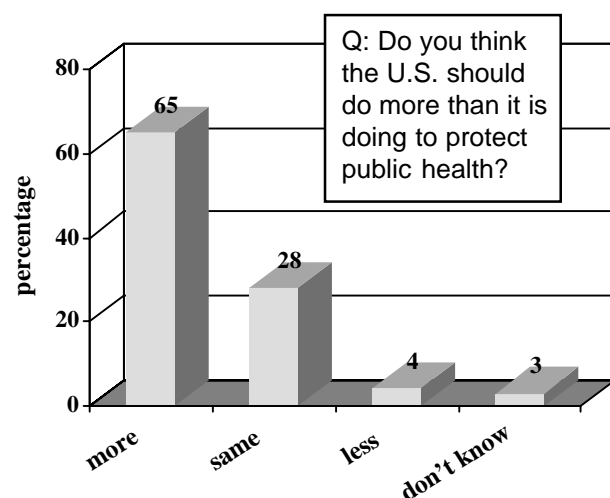
The poll reflects an enlightened public understanding of the role of personal choice in attaining good health, and suggests there is a strong mandate for more and better efforts to change these behaviors to improve the nation's health.

Pew poll finds wide support for strengthening public health and combatting environmental causes of disease.

The Pew Charitable Trusts commissioned a survey of Americans' worries about environmentally-related health problems, and the public health system's capacity to guard against them. It polled 1,234 American voters in March, 1999. Highlights:

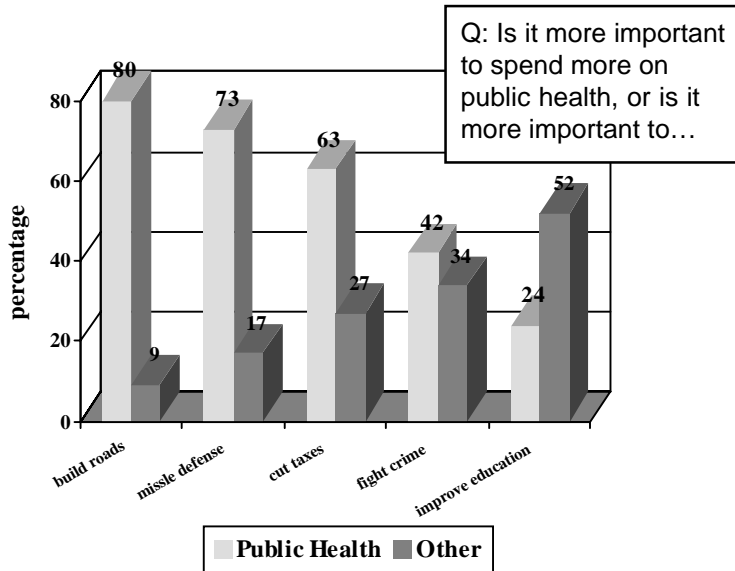
- Americans believe that our country is devoting insufficient resources to public health and want more spending and more effort. Two thirds want more done, while only a quarter think that we're doing enough.
- Overwhelming numbers favor greater spending on public health than on other priorities. They favor public health spending over:
 - Building public buildings (by nine to one);
 - The missile defense system (by four to one);

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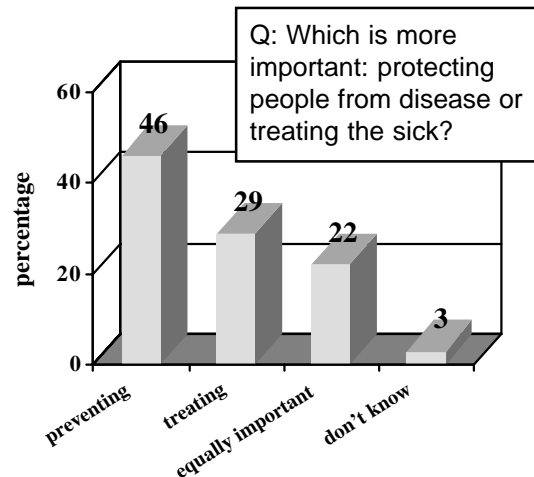
Cutting taxes (by over two to one);
Fighting crime (with 40% wanting more for public health).

- Two-thirds of the public believes that preventing disease is more important or as important as treating sickness.
- The public overwhelmingly believes that environmental factors are a major cause of health problems and disease.
- Party affiliation makes no difference. Democrats, Republicans and Independents all think environmental factors are an important cause of disease/health problems.



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As policy makers and legislators set policy and spending priorities, they can derive important cues from the public's deepening understanding of public health.

A Deepening Understanding of Public Health's Work and Mission,
prepared by Richard Bolig

References:

- 1) *National Journal* website, Today's National Polls, at <http://www.cloakroom.com/members/polltrack/today's>
- 2) *Update Summer 1999* of the Pew Environmental Health Commission of the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, at <http://pewenvirohealth.jhsph.edu>.